

## **RESEÑA**

**Lilith Mahmud. *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 256 pages. ISBN: 978-0-226-09586-8**

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Given the great degree of interest in Freemasonry (and secret societies generally) in recent years, thanks to publications such as *The Da Vinci Code* and Hollywood productions like *National Treasure*, other works that go beyond fiction must be brought to light. Although it may be entertaining to have a corpus of books with the purpose of fictionalizing Freemasonry, it is necessary to study it from another perspective. In recent decades, scholars from Spain, France, and other parts of continental Europe, as well as some in Latin America, have focused their research on the study of Freemasonry. However, in the United States (the country that produces most of the scholarly publications in the so-called Western world), very few academic publications on the subject of Freemasonry have appeared. Thus, it is extremely refreshing to find a text published in the U.S. that deals with this topic in a very creative and serious way. I applaud the University of Chicago Press for publishing *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges* by Lilith Mahmud, who teaches women's studies and anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. In general terms, this is a very solid ethnography of female freemasons and other women's co-masonic organizations in Italy.

Most of the works published on Freemasonry today are produced by historians (either academic historian or Masonic historians), or they particularly focus on historical or sociological aspects of Masonry. However, Professor Lilith Mahmud's work is unique in that it is an ethnographic work that took her several months of developing relationships with four different masonic groups in the Tuscan area of Italy, especially in Florence and Rome. The four groups she studies are: 1) The Grande Oriente d'Italia-Palazzo Giustiniani (Grand Orient of Italy or GOI), 2) The Ordine della Stella d'Oriente (The Order of the Eastern Star), 3) Gran Loggia d'Italia degli Antichi Liberi Accettati Muratori-Obbedienza di Piazza del Gesù, Palazzo Vitelleschi (Grand Lodge of Italy of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons or GLDI), and 4) Gran Loggia Massonica Femminile d'Italia (Grand Women's Masonic Lodge of Italy or GLMFI). The author selected these groups because, as she states: "each of these four groups reflected a different Masonic path and was characterized by particular understandings of

gender and esotericism.” (page 13). The study of these groups not only provides different perspectives and attitudes on gender, and of course the esoteric nature of the craft, but it also sheds light, as the author shows, on issues that deal with regularity and recognition not exclusive to Italy, which permeate the masonic world at large.

*The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* provides a definition of Freemasonry that focuses on the modern stage of the fraternity and deals with two important aspects: secrecy and fraternity. Mahmud argues that “Freemasonry is the quintessential Western secret society, one that since its foundations has been mythologized in countless worlds of fiction and in the collective imaginary” (page 6). Proceeding from that general notion, the author develops her argument, dissecting each one of the key terms and giving important attention to the ways in which Italian freemasons negotiate, contest and live their lives in their hometowns and in a country in which Massoneria (Masonry) is still (and has long been) a very unknown organization that it is related to organizations such as the Mafia. Another aspect that Mahmud analyzes in her book is the fact that the masonic institution is commonly understood as an elite organization of men who promote fraternity. Thus, she goes beyond that misleading impression by studying the role of women, never forgetting the fact that this is an organization whose members are educated, middle-class and upper-middle-class individuals who, on the one hand, have a privileged place in their society, but on the other hand, must be discreet about their Masonic affiliations due to the bad reputation and rivalries that this organization has had over the years.

Mahmud’s ethnography has several positive qualities: 1) As has been mentioned previously, it explores a neglected topic that deserves much academic attention; 2) The way in which she inserts her reflexive sensitivity provides a unique perspective for those in the areas of cultural anthropology and folklore—she is always aware of her place, her informants’ place and the role of the ethnographer; 3) She combines a sophisticated theoretical analysis with a strong bibliography and savvy interpretation of the sources; 4) She provides a well-written monograph that can be of use at a graduate seminar or a book club. In summary, the monograph is a strong academic contribution that I am sure will become a classic work, not only providing extensive information on Italian Freemasonry, but also an insightful theoretical approach and incisive methodology that many scholars can benefit from.

*The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* is divided into five chapters, with three short vignettes that the author calls “passwords.” She explains that these passwords represent a Freemason’s journey along their initiation journey. Mahmud states that such “ethnographically driven scenes that I have inserted between the chapters are also meant to function as passwords: each provides an interpretative key to decipher the chapter that immediately follows it” (page 18). This is but one example of the creativity that surrounds the texts – never forcing the issue and always providing the reader with a clear idea of what the author is trying to present.

In Chapter 1 (entitled: ‘Spaces of Discretion’), Mahmud explains that Florence was chosen as the base for her research due to its central location. Despite the fact that

she is familiar with Italian culture, when she moved to Florence, she felt a sense of dislocation. She goes on to explain her quotidian experience with walking around the city before moving on to discuss the core of the chapter: discretion (rather than secrecy). However, the reader does not feel that she is starting with a story that is not relevant. In fact, her use of reflexivity analysis makes the rest more coherent, providing a sense of place. Her discussion on discretion, as it applies to the Masonic Italian context, explains why the Italian masons prefer such a word rather than secrecy. As is the case of other societies that others such as Paul Rich and De Los Reyes have shown<sup>1</sup>, Mahmud's informants, regardless of their gender, always point out that Masonry was not such a secret society, but rather, a discreet organization due to the Italian historical context. For example, consider the scandals surrounding the Propaganda Due Lodge (P2 Lodge), the historical persecutions and bulls from the popes (including Benedict XVI), and the fact that in the Italian collective imagination (and most of the global consciousness), secret societies, such as the masons, are considered undemocratic. She concludes that to Italian Freemasons, it was important to "live amid the profane in a society that largely viewed the lodges negatively by, for instance, negotiating their public presentations or even their self-disclosures among profane family members" (page 65).

In between the first and second chapters is Password I, which offers a brilliant reflexive narrative that I reserve my right as reviewer not discuss here, because I want to extend that opportunity to the reader, in order that they may discover it by themselves.

Chapter 2, "Initiations," studies the various rituals, motives, and social paths that her informants have chosen to join Freemasonry. Here, she proposes a term that she calls: intersubjectivity—the desire to become a brother. However, as she observes, gender dynamics and relations within the lodges function as mediators to the initiation of women. She discusses the fact that women were often accused of imitating the men, and thus their existence was called into question. Nevertheless, she shows how her informants and other female Freemasons have faced and contested such claims. In this chapter, Mahmud provides a feminist anthropological analysis that it is not exclusive to this chapter, but contributes to what I think is the core of her work: demystifying the practice of Freemasonry and providing new views with respect to gender dynamics within masonic spaces.

In "Brotherly Love," which is the third chapter of this book, the author provides a historical analysis of the path that woman Freemasons have followed since their creation, highlighting their right-wing, upper-class sensibilities. Mahmud talks about the different women and mixed masonic groups and the opinions they held of each other. She also problematizes the use of language, since in Italian, unlike in English, some words require the feminine form and some others, which did not have a traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Guillermo de los Reyes, *Herencias secretas: Masonería, política y sociedad en México* (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2009). Paul Rich, "Researching Grandfather's Secrets: Rummaging in the Odd Fellow and Masonic Attics", *Journal of American Culture* 20 (1997): 139-146.

feminine form, are used in the masculine form. She also discusses the issue of the word “sisterhood” in that “Fraternity and brotherhood have different connotations in English, but in Italian they are both *fratellanza*, and although the term sisters (*sorelle*) has the same literal and political significance in both languages, sisterhood is not really a word in Italian, and certainly not one that my informants cared to coin” (page 93).

A great number of the author’s informants told her that they did not subscribe to feminist ideas, as shown when the author asked, how they thought 1970s feminist movements related to the project of women’s Freemasonry. One of her informants, Margherita, after taking a long drag from her cigarette, leaned back on the couch and said, “Oh, dear ... dear, we are not feminists. We are absolutely not feminists” (page 97). Mahmud argues that her informants’ perspective of gender is essentialist and follows the male-female binaries (page 99). In this regard, the author states: “For many of the women Freemasons I knew, feminism as they knew it was clearly irrelevant (page 100). Mahmud argues that women’s liberation in Italy would not necessarily be achieved by focusing only on the idea that men and women are innately equal, but should rather focus on celebrating women’s unique contribution to society at large “by valorizing women’s unique contributions and creating alliances of women across social classes (page 99).

In Chapter 4, entitled “Speculative Labor,” Mahmud describes and analyzes the praxis of Freemasonry in Italy with an objective to demystify the notions that others have about what freemasons do. She argues that what Masons, both men and women, do in the lodge is “intrinsically intellectual labor, and the esoteric rituals that are performed inside Masonic temples are aimed at facilitating what is primarily a learning path” (page 124). She also explores how her informants translate their Masonic knowledge and practices into their daily lives, as in the case of Francesca, one of her informants who explains how some masons bring their masonic values to their quotidian likes: “There are surgeons among us, university professors, people who are not used to listening to others ... An Apprentice must learn humility” (page 125). Here, she explores the aspect of cultural capital, privilege, nationalism, race and class.

The last chapter, “Transparent Conspiracies,” is an archaeology of the term “Massoneria” (not Freemasonry, because she is studying the Italian case only). She asks how Masonry has become such a loaded term (pages 18, 157). She analyses all the unfortunate cases in which Freemasonry was involved and the reason why the policy of transparency was imposed to the lodges. However, she points to “women’s absence from the blacklists as a striking example of the limits and contradictions of transparency itself” (page 157). The male cases are a different story and also depend on the lodge. “The legal and political discourse of transparency,” Mahmud argues, “has gained popularity in societies across the globe, where transparency is increasingly used as a measure and signifier of good governance and democratic values (page 157).

In summary, *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* provides an objective, frank, and analytical view of four different Masonic groups in Italy, vis-à-vis Freemasonry at large in Italy. The author does not aim to provide an apologetic or

negative view of Freemasonry. My only criticism of this work is the author's discussion on the history of Freemasonry and the limited sources that she uses in this particular regard. However, that is not the goal of her work, so such flaws do not affect the main argument as a whole. I recommend this book not only for its innovative and powerful theoretical analysis, but also for its ethnographic discussion and for those who are interested in understanding gender systems, privileges, and elites. In her "Profanation" (the concluding chapter), Mahmud shows that her informants, female Freemasons, "have deconstructed themselves in order to become brothers," (page 196). She concludes: "Ethnographically, I saw that fraternity operated not only to constitute a particular community of practice within a lodge, but also, and more pervasively, to put forth an imaginary community of civil society and of civilization (page 196). *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* provides a new perspective into the study of Freemasonry, not only because of its groundbreaking ethnographic methodology and feminist analysis, but also because it unveils the role of women in masonic groups and how in Italy they have transgressed such spaces of discretion, passwords, and brotherhood. This book is indeed a must read!

## **Bibliography**

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